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SUBJECT: CHILE: CONCERTACION PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES FACE
FIRST PRIMARIES APRIL 5

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On April 5, the center-left Concertacion coalition will hold primaries in Chile's O'Higgins (VI) and Maule (VII) regions between former President and current Senator Eduardo Frei and upstart challenger Senator Jose Antonio Gomez. The Concertacion has no set process for choosing presidential candidates, and this year opted for primaries to be held on a rolling regional basis, likely because subsequent primaries could be canceled if Frei trounces his rival as expected. Voter turnout in this first regional primary is expected to be low. Concertacion leaders fear--with good reason--that the Alianza coalition will use low rates of participation to bolster their claims that the Concertacion coalition is fatigued and the public's patience with twenty years of Concertacion rule is nearing an end. End Summary.

Primary Election Primer

¶2. (U) Unlike in the United States, Chile's political parties have no set rules for how to choose their political candidates. The conservative Alianza coalition has always relied on an informal process of polls and internal consultations, and has never held a primary. The center-left Concertacion coalition held primaries twice before: in 1993, when Eduardo Frei (Christian Democrat--DC) defeated Ricardo Lagos (Socialist Party--PS/Party for Democracy--PPD), and in 1999, when Ricardo Lagos (PS/PPD) defeated Andres Zaldivar (DC). In 2004, DC candidate Soledad Alvear withdrew before planned primaries when polls showed that Socialist candidate Michelle Bachelet had a substantial lead. In each of the primaries, the rules were negotiated during the electoral year.

¶3. (SBU) The political rules for choosing a candidate continued to evolve this year. As the possibility of a primary swirled around the Concertacion camp, Frei's willingness to participate set him apart early on from Ricardo Lagos, another former president, who was perceived as arrogant for his reluctance to agree to a primary. Once Lagos, OAS Secretary General Jose Miguel Insulza, and DC hopeful Soledad Alvear withdrew from the race, the withdrawal of Radical Social Democrat party (PRSD) candidate Jose Antonio Gomez and Frei's emergence as the Concertacion candidate seemed all but certain. Only gradually did Concertacion leaders realize that Gomez had no plans to stand down, and that Frei would be pushed into a primary against him.

¶4. (U) In contrast to previous Concertacion primaries, which were between more evenly matched competitors, this year's primaries are scheduled for six dates in different regions--April 5 in central Chile, April 19 in northern Chile, April 26 in southern Chile, May 3 in Valparaiso, May 10 in BioBio Region, and May 17 in the Santiago area.

(Comment: Although never explicitly stated, the obvious advantage of this staggered schedule is that later primaries could be canceled if Gomez withdraws during the process. End Comment.) Under continued pressure to withdraw from the race, Gomez first promised to withdraw if he did not win at least 10% in the first primary. Later, he and Frei agreed that if either candidate beat the other by 20 points or more in the first primary, the trailing candidate would withdraw.

Apathy, Frei's Lead, and Lack of Awareness Likely to Spell Low Voter Turnout

¶5. (SBU) The April 5 election is open to all registered voters in the O'Higgins (VI) and Maule (VII) regions who are Concertacion party members or independents. Local leaders expect turnout to be 10% or less of this figure. Gabriel Diaz, PRSD Regional Secretary told Poloff March 30 that a turnout of 40,000 voters would be "great."

¶6. (SBU) Political apathy, Frei's clear advantage, a lack of public awareness of the election, and competing public events are all likely to hurt voter turnout. Many Chileans seem to feel stuck between two unappealing political choices: the continuation of Concertacion's 20-year dominance of Chilean politics, or backing a political alliance which is still

affiliated with Pinochet, at least in the eyes of those old enough to have lived through the regime. Particularly as younger leaders, like the DC's "young princes," find that it is difficult to gain a voice within the political structure, voters are increasingly disenchanted with the shuffling of the same faces from one government post to another. In addition, as a former President, Frei's victory over a little-known senator from a small party seems assured, and the lack of perceived urgency in the race may keep would-be Frei voters at home.

¶7. (SBU) In conversations with Poloff March 30, local political leaders lamented the lack of public awareness of the election. In previous primaries, the elections were held on the same day throughout the country, and so the process received widespread media attention. Because this election will be held in just two provinces, both outside large cities, it has attracted little attention in the national press and many eligible voters are unaware of it.

¶8. (SBU) Another obstacle is that the primary coincides with the biggest local event of the year in Rancagua, the capital of the O'Higgins region. The national rodeo championships and accompanying huaso (Chilean cowboy) festival will compete with the elections for voters' attention and will draw thousands of potential voters away from their polling places.

Preparing at the Last Minute

¶9. (SBU) Concertacion leaders in the O'Higgins Region, just south of Santiago, described a scramble to make logistical arrangements for primaries on April 5. A PPD commune leader told Poloff that the primaries were being organized "a la Chilena"--at the last minute and with almost no funding. Socialist Regional President Cristo Cucumides, who seemed taken aback by his PPD colleague's frankness, assured Poloff that the primaries would run smoothly and that the parties would back the winner--even if it were upstart Gomez (reftel). On the PRSD side, Regional Secretary Gabriel Diaz noted that the party was having trouble finding enough volunteers to serve as poll workers.

¶10. (SBU) Meanwhile, coordinating with the city's mayor, a member of the staunchly conservative Democratic Union Party

(UDI), was somewhat challenging. Schools often serve as polling places during the general election, but, according to Frei campaign organizers, Mayor Eduardo Soto was slow to grant permission for the Concertacion to use the city's schools for the primary. Intendente Hector Huenchullan confirmed that, as in a general election, his office will provide security, although the Carabineros will be deployed for this primary rather than the military as in general elections.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) Frei and the three largest Concertacion parties have the potential for minimal gains or big losses in this weekend's primaries. Given the expectations of a resounding Frei victory, an overwhelming Frei win will be just a ho-hum formality on the road to the official Concertacion endorsement. In contrast, if Gomez could manage the unlikely feat of garnering 40% or more of the votes cast, it will raise serious doubts about the Frei's ability to energize voters. Meanwhile, voter turnout is likely to be quite low, and this will only play into the hands of the Alianza, who claim that the Concertacion coalition has run out of new ideas and energy and that voters are fed up with continuous Concertacion rule.
SIMONS